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## BURKE'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

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Burke's chief claim to a permanent place among thinkers lies in his critical rejection of eighteenth-century rationalism in political philosophy, and the general character of this I may assume to be sufficiently familiar not to need exposition. The true virtue in politics, according to Burke, is not metaphysical reasoning, but practical tact and prudence. Go slow, build on the past, avoid sweeping changes, take the "precautions which distinguish benevolence from imbecility"—this is the substance of his teaching. As my purpose is largely polemical, I should make it clear at the start that I have no quarrel with such a position in a general way. As a controversialist, Burke must be allowed to have had considerably the better of the argument. Indeed, were it not that overconfidence in reasoned theories of society running far ahead of practice continues to be much in evidence, one might consider it hardly necessary to raise again the question of the validity, within certain limits, of his justification of expediency versus theory. But the limits would still remain to be determined. For however valid in itself, Burke's doctrine may become the starting-point of very opposite social attitudes according as it is held.

The difference of emphasis may be suggested by the two words *experience* and *experiment*. The one of these looks chiefly to the past, the other chiefly to the future; but it is not unnatural to take them at times as interchangeable. Now the major part at least of what is most valuable in Burke's philosophy is covered by the word "experiment." To say that politics should be experimental is to imply that it should never "entirely and at once depart from antiquity." But a philosophy of "experience" may also have the sense, not that we should

judge on the basis of experience, new and old, our own and that of others, but that we should *abide by the experience of the past*, should accept its outcome in opposition to our merely personal notions, and make it our main business to retain unsullied the wisdom it has handed down.

Now whatever advantages may be allowed to attach to a regard for antiquity, it is clear at the start that Burke displays a degree of veneration for the past, and a fear of innovation, which inclines distinctly to the latter emphasis. No one will deny the danger that lies in a spirit of reckless innovation. But also one might suppose that over-timidity fails of being altogether safe. The present world happens to be so constituted that it is important at times that one be willing to take risks. Burke seldom or never has a word to say of this counter danger. On the contrary, he finds it hard to express strongly enough his ideal of prudential timidity in all matters that concern the state. He will change nothing till he can see his way with complete certainty. He will admit a justification to the idea of revolution that sets itself against the time-honored constitutional forms, only under circumstances of such extremity as would justify our dispensing with the whole moral law. He will set his face rigidly against any tendency to question the existing order, to make the benefits of the constitution a matter of discussion, because it is unsettling and of uncertain issue, just as his modern disciples proclaim the sin of muck-raking as a menace to prosperity. Although he grants, with some hesitation, that in theory truth may perhaps be a higher aim than peace, yet in practice, unless the truth is very self-evident indeed, he is for holding fast to peace. It is odd that Burke should be so mightily concerned for the consequences of discussion if he really is assured that no genuine grievances are to be disclosed. But in any case it remains true that the impression his attitude leaves is the not very bracing one of a desire above all else to be safe and sane, to risk nothing, to tolerate what is bad oftentimes for fear of worse—an attitude which is the more disappointing in Burke in its contrast to the fine moral

fervor with which he himself can deal with such reforms as do not stray beyond the limits of constitutionality.

The inadequacy of Burke's philosophy of experience is equally suggested by his exaggerated opinion of the wisdom of the past. It is not easy to acquit him even of the vulgar prejudice which sets our ancestors on a pedestal of wisdom and virtue simply because they are sufficiently removed from us to have taken their place in a glorified mythus. He speaks of our canonized forefathers, our wiser and better ancestors. God forbid, he piously exclaims, that we should pass judgment upon people who framed the laws and institutions prior to our insect origin of yesterday. It very likely is human nature, as he himself remarks, rather to defer to the wisdom of times past than to the present, of whose imbecility we have daily experience. But this suggests rather too forcibly that we fail to be in like manner impressed with the imbecility of our ancestors, only because we are no longer in possession of a sufficiently minute knowledge of their motives and reasonings. What in one place Burke adduces as evidence of this superiority—the great goodness of our forefathers in sending over colonists to America to introduce the Christian religion and Christian manners among the natives—is not a little indicative of such a bias toward historical idealization.

What then does constitute the advantage to which the past has a fair claim? The obvious answer is, that by its being past, it has had a chance to put its experiments to the test of experience, and so has got rid of some rubbish which, were the testing still in the future, there could be no certain grounds for condemning. But this is not enough for Burke. For his thesis is, not merely that experience is the test of political truth, but that we have already reached a point where through the process of experience a final constitution of English society has been sifted out. But evidently this will not follow except on one supposition. The past is justified only because its results justify themselves to us, the inheritors of the past, in terms of our satisfaction with them. If people are discontented, then the sole reason for maintaining the superiority of the past fails.

And accordingly the question presents itself to Burke again: Why are you so passionately setting forth the claims of the past, crying down the new spirit of dissatisfaction and revolt? If your estimate of the past is right, it approves itself by the absence of other than minor danger from a discontent which has no real ground. If your apprehensions are well grounded, antiquity cannot support the claims you make for it.

Burke tries on occasion both the ways in which this difficulty might be met. On the one hand he is continually endeavoring to reassure himself in his confidence that things are quite as they should be, and that abuses are only temporary and venial, to recall the unbroken faith of earlier days that in the British constitution, and the Whig party, the powers of good in the universe have put forth their supreme and final effort. Something remains to be said of this self-persuasion in the sequel. But first it may be well to consider the more reasoned grounds on which he attempts to make good his confidence in the inherent justice of the English social structure.

There are two motives in Burke's theory of the grounds of political belief which are not wholly in accord. Nothing is clearer than that his philosophy does not intend to be in the end merely utilitarian and positive. He is fully convinced that, along with utility, there is a second and more ultimate foundation of society—eternal justice; that there is a law of truth and equity in human history which every human law or institution must reflect if it is to have the slightest claim on allegiance. Now one might perhaps suppose that if this is so, it would be useful to apply these fundamental principles of justice to the criticism of human affairs. And this is what the philosophers were endeavoring actually to do. After all, the real inwardness of their meaning is not to be found in a tinkering with constitutions, as Burke uncharitably assumes, but in this effort to apply a rational standard for judging things as they happen to exist. And however crude its application, the "Rights of Man" furnished, and was intended to furnish, such a moral standard. Taken in the proper way, and not as a rule which tells offhand just what politically to do in each particular case,

this is by no means the impertinence that Burke declares it to be. Properly used, even its abstractness is not altogether a deficiency. If such a principle really represents a genuine insight, that can serve as a compass to guide our general direction, while yet we realize that it has to be interpreted by reference to particular circumstances, it is in a way easier oftentimes to make use of in its more general form. It impresses the logical imagination more, the issue is less apt to be obscured by the irrelevancies of the particular case, it carries a certain weight of moral impulse that may easily be lost the more we attempt to make it comprehensive and concrete. Expediency is a valuable word, but it cannot be claimed that it stirs very wildly the moral pulse; whereas Burke himself would have to admit that the "Rights of Man" is even dangerously exciting. At the very least it furnishes a rallying point, a flag or emblem, in the constant warfare against bureaucracy. What is the use, asks Burke, of discussing the abstract right to food? The real question is as to the ways of procuring it. But what if our rulers are not interested in procuring it, but rather in evading so far as possible any responsibility in the matter? Then surely it may be a very practical and useful thing indeed to talk, and to talk very freely and pointedly, about our rights.

Now to such a plea as this Burke makes, it may be said, no demur. As a matter of fact it is the very thing that he himself is constantly doing. But the point I am trying to make is this, that on this account his opposition of abstract principles to expediency is polemically misleading. For in the end it is not expediency at all which is the real motive of his opposition; it is rather a second principle which he substitutes for the revolutionary principle of the "Rights of Man." Erroneous theories stand opposed in his mind to the principle of *mos majorum*, the glorification of the constitution as it stands—the constitution "whose sole authority is that it has existed time out of mind." And to say that the principle of political action is the paramount authority of the past, is quite different from saying that all changes should keep in view expediency and fact. Accordingly the real thing that Burke has to justify is not expediency

versus theory, but one theory against another. The task laid upon him is to establish the philosophy of the legal type of mind as against that of the moralist and reformer, and to ground the over-ruling claims of precedent.

It is not difficult to understand the state of mind which animates Burke. It is most readily illustrated in a religious attitude which is strictly analogous. The belief in an authoritative Bible is not itself opposed to a confidence 'in reason. Rather such an authority is conceived to be an embodied standard of reason. But when human thinking has started an attack upon the book, its defender finds himself forced in some measure to make a distinction which he would be better pleased to avoid, and to set himself in opposition to the presumption and inadequacy of the merely human intellect, in order to defend the embodiment of settled and digested truth on which he has been accustomed to rest.

But political conservatism, for a man of Burke's caliber, presented a difficulty which did not meet him in the same acute form in religion. There was a generally accepted basis of authority in religion to be found in the conception of revelation. But something different was needed to establish the divine authority of the present social order. Burke's answer is, in general terms, an appeal to history, backed by an underlying faith in the divine order of the world. Prescription, he says, is the most solid of all titles. "It is the deliberate election of ages and generations, made by circumstances ten thousand times better than choice. The individual is foolish, the multitude for the moment is foolish, the species is wise." The justification of the existing order is this test of a developing race experience, which has actually issued in that most blessed of human products, the British constitution; a faith finally anchored by confidence in an over-ruling Providence, from whose justice and benevolence such an outcome as we actually find might from the start have been expected. "For it is not to be imagined that God would suffer this great gift of government to be the plaything and the sport of the feeble will of man." I do not know of a better parallel than is to be found in Newman's philosophy of the au-

thority of the church. There is the same emotional background as determining an a priori probability, the same rather uncritical acceptance of a present attainment as a final meeting of this demand, the same depreciation of human in favor of institutional reason. As Newman would revive apostolic fervor in order to defend the church against its enemies, so with Burke the final justification of reform in the state is always that by so doing we may preserve the time-honored frame of the constitution. It is unnecessary to do more than indicate here the obvious defect of such a view. The test of developing experience is indeed a perfectly sound one so long as we do not endeavor to arrest this testing process at an arbitrary point which we happen to have reached. Development and the test of experience are a sound basis for experimentation, but they cannot safely be appealed to, to ground a perfect and finished product.

But while prescription exalts the embodied wisdom of institutions, it is a principle which cannot safely give any great scope to actual human reason. Accordingly Burke is at times very close to agnosticism in his estimate of man's rational powers. Burke always tests thinking by its rather immediate practical utility. What is the use of them? is the question which he brings to such writings as profess simply to be asking for truth. He has very little sense for the value of intellectual understanding as such: superstition, for example, is not such a bad thing if it can be put by the statesman to practical benefit; and he deprecates the conversion of any man from the sect into which he was born, since correctness of opinion counts little as against religious peace and quietness. Perhaps this accounts too in part for Burke's own rather flexible conception of the ethics of argument, and his readiness to resort to somewhat dubious tricks of rhetoric when there is a good cause to be maintained. This depreciation of reason is the natural outcome of his pragmatic or expediency philosophy, quite apart from the exigencies of the polemical situation. What indeed would become of the world if the practice of all moral duties and the foundations of society rested on having their reasons made clear and demonstrated to every individual? And if the general habit of



inquiry thus would be intolerable, it is not safe, Burke with his habitual caution argues, for anyone to meddle with such questions, but all should fall back upon the pious trust that a greater intelligence than ours has worked things out for the best, and not attempt to "submit the sovereign reason of the world to the caprices of weak and giddy men." Of course, it is true that there is a risk in setting our private judgment against the wisdom of the ages, and it is easy to sneer at the pretensions of the former, to speak scornfully of "going out of our way to discover whether the venerated constitution does or does not accord with a preconceived scheme in the mind of certain gentlemen." This is a sort of arrogance to which he who is backed by authority is always prone. But we must not forget that no one has any mind except his own private one, and if we are only to use this when we admire, and never when we condemn, defects, if they exist, are certain not to be discovered. Accordingly, although historical experience is Burke's court of appeal, it is to the blind workings of history that the appeal is made, and not to any reasoned and critical analysis of it. Any possible knowledge of history in this last sense he expressly calls very superficial and unimportant. And in this way he is enabled to minimize the need of finding causes for such a revolution as was occurring in Europe. Revolutions are largely unpredictable; and so we can ignore the claim that there must be real defects in society to occasion so widespread a discontent, can throw all the blame on the revolutionists, and treat their conduct as a mere explosion of unreason and bad morals. So again if we seem to see flaws in the constitution, Burke replies, in the familiar words of the defender of the Scriptures, that the lack is in us. We ought to "understand it according to our measure, and to venerate when we are not able perfectly to comprehend."

But now in the background there has been one aspect of decisive importance which has not yet been sufficiently emphasized. The most active agent in Burke's conclusions is to be found undoubtedly in his emotional bent. The gist of this side of his philosophy is felicitously put in his own words: "Politics

ought to be adjusted not to human reason, but to human nature, of which reason is only a part, and often a minor part." The germs of this are found as far back as the "Essay on the Sublime." "Whenever," he writes, "the wisdom of the Creator intended we should be affected with anything, he did not confide the execution of his design to the languid and precarious operation of our reason, but he endued it with powers and properties that prevent the understanding and even the will, which, seizing the senses and imagination, captivate the soul before the understanding is ready either to join with them or to oppose them." It is scarcely forcing things to say that in the final analysis the ground of government is for Burke reducible to that aesthetic or semi-aesthetic judgment which he had examined in his early essay.

It scarcely admits of doubt that in Burke's case this emotional bias has throughout an influence so dominant and compelling that it ought to put us on our guard. Whenever our theories contradict our feelings, he declares, our feelings are true and the theory false. "Never, no never, did Nature say one thing and Reason another." And now this does not profess to be merely an academic justification of the rights of feeling. To say that true feeling and true reason coincide might theoretically be true enough, but politically it would be quite unmeaning unless we were able to identify and to locate pretty precisely the feelings for which nature stands sponsor. And if it turns out that we mean by nature simply that more reputable expression of national life and feeling as it is familiar to the modern man—our patriotism, our benevolences, our public and private admirations—it seems scarcely so self-evident that these are bound of necessity to coincide with right reason. But this is what Burke intends. By feeling he means such feelings as in his customary social surroundings seem to the average Englishman spontaneous and proper. That such untutored feelings are "natural" is to Burke sufficient evidence that they are sound. It is such "unerring and powerful instincts" which procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle on which Nature teaches us to revere individual

men—on account of their age, and on account of those from whom they are descended. "We fear God, we look up with awe to kings, with affection to Parliaments, with duty to magistrates, with reverence to priests and with respect to nobility." Why? because such feelings are natural, and all others are false and spurious. The constitution to this view stands out with all the solidity and unapproachable majesty of a natural object, to be revered and contemplated, but not criticized. What concretely Burke has in mind then is sufficiently plain; it is not merely the primitive instincts, but the familiar objects as well to which these attach in a society with caste distinctions.

In Burke, then, the purely general thesis that man's emotional nature has a claim to be satisfied in any scheme of human society passes over into the easily separable claim that the particular objects toward which his own emotional bent was directed were Nature's eternal answer to the cravings of the human heart. And in this way the vague doctrine that the laws of eternal justice have given birth to the British constitution is rendered more definite, and at the same time withdrawn from the uncertain and possibly dangerous test of a personal and reasoned experience of its workings, by the identification of Nature with those "natural" sentiments which he found actually serving to buoy up his own cherished political ideals, and by virtue of which he can condemn a spirit of innovation on general grounds as the "result of a selfish temper and confined views," while the existing system stands forth as a "great and self-evident correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world—the disposition of a stupendous wisdom." When, therefore, Burke contemplates the ignoring of ranks and distinctions, the exalting of inferiors—"associations of tailors and carpenters"—to a level with their betters, and turns aside from it as a self-evident "warring with nature," we are to recognize that this in part at least is merely an expression of the most common of human weaknesses—the unwillingness to recognize as within the course of Nature whatever is unfamiliar, different from the settled customs of the land.

Before turning to the more reasoned basis for this philosophy

of aristocracy, there are certain further points that may profitably be recognized and discounted, which are connected with his emotional temperament. One can hardly fail, for example, to recognize that Burke is constituted with an instinctive dislike to negation and destruction, which is not wholly amenable to rational considerations. It is very well to talk of the importance of building on the past, but there is a point of wisdom also in knowing when a thing's usefulness is over. Not all the heritage of the past is embodied in the institutions it has created; it may consist in part in a realization that the institution is no longer adequate to its purpose. But Burke has an instinct against throwing anything away, like the housewife who collects the *débris* of a lifetime in her garret; take as an example his plea for the retention of the monasteries in France.

In a more positive way, also, Burke's emotional prepossessions require an allowance to be made. The pomp of life has a tendency to overawe him after a fashion which in a smaller and less sincere man might easily give occasion to the charge of fulsomeness. Burke must of course have recognized his own political merits; and yet he talks at times in a tone of exaggerated humility, like an underservant who "knows his place." The thought of any abridgment of feudal rights, of any approach to simple man-to-man relationships, seems repugnant to him. The slighting way in which frequently he speaks of lawyers and mechanics, of "plebeian pride and upstart insolence," indicates an inbred respect for birth which only stops short of being servile. Toward his own sovereign his expressions are sometimes needlessly eulogistic, to use no harsher term. His best prayer for George III is that he should "live, reign, and die exactly like his illustrious predecessor." A royal proclamation is the "best of messages, to the best of people, from the best of kings." Still worse is his compliment to the king's style in a state paper—"a style which such a poor crow quill as mine can never hope to equal." At the very least, Burke cannot be acquitted of an over-solemn and over-impressive tone in his admirations; witness the highly wrought romanticism of his Indian writings.

Of course in a way this charge of sentimentalism is a matter of taste and perspective, which in the end is scarcely open to strict argument. But there is one aspect of it which is less debatable, and which, after making all allowance, ought assuredly to lower the prestige of his personal authority. This is the palpable unfairness and intolerance into which he is too frequently betrayed by the force of his feelings. Possibly it is an amiable weakness that one should be so strongly possessed by his sense of the worth of certain things that his temper cannot stand the strain of hearing them questioned. But it *is* a weakness. The fact is, it has to be said that Burke had no real conception of the virtue of tolerance. It is perfectly true that in particular cases he stood up bravely for the tolerant policy. He is an unceasing advocate of liberty for Catholics. But the Catholic faith did not cross his prejudices; indeed its foundation in the past strongly appealed to him. But there is no credit in tolerating what seems to us perfectly tolerable. Now the moment his real emotions are touched, Burke loses suddenly all his sweet reasonableness. He becomes vindictive, and is for bringing in force to avenge his outraged sensibilities. The Catholic is the victim of an "outrageous and antiquated spirit of intolerance." But when it comes to tolerating the atheist, that is quite another matter. These "insect reptiles" are outlaws of the constitution. And as for Jacobinism and the new philosophy, Burke is as convinced of his moral mission to root out the heresy as ever was a Spanish inquisitor. Paine he would have imprisoned. The Unitarian malcontents shall be refused the relief which all his life he had been urging for the Catholics. An honest belief in the principles of the Revolution on the part of the French priests shall be so far from modifying their punishment when the exiles return, that it shall be the express ground for special retribution upon them. Of course the professed basis for intolerance in both cases is the safety of the state. To this end, he would regard it as the interest, duty, and right of government to "attend much to opinions." But Burke seems oblivious to the fact that along that path danger lies—all the danger that has ever attached to persecu-

tion; that a "reasonable, prudent, and moderate coercion" is the plea of all persecutors equally. And he fails conspicuously to guard his doctrine to avoid the danger. The coercive power of the state, he says indeed, is limited to what is necessary for its preservation. But does this mean the preservation of society, or—what he seems to say—the preservation of the existing state, with all its detailed structure of traditional minutiae bound up with tenacious privilege and vested interest. And to make it worse, Burke expressly denies one of the strongest arguments for toleration—its value in opening the way to possible new truth. For it is precisely new ideas that Burke would submit to persecution. The presumption is ever on the side of possession—surely of all human propositions one of the most debatable; and therefore the oldest error and superstition is to be treated more tenderly than what has still to make its way in men's minds. The result is a justification of that whole policy which disgraced England for a number of years to come. "I am not enamoured with this plan of representation," Burke writes, "and as little do I relish any bandings and associations for procuring it." The restriction of such voluntary associations, or "clubs for debating forms of the constitution"—there is something of almost official insolence in Burke's proposal to grant relief to the Unitarians only when they disband as a faction and act as individuals—the limitation of the freedom of the press, the urging upon the Holy Alliance its "duty to know and its right to prevent any capital innovation in Europe"—even outside a monarch's own territory—"which may amount to the erection of a dangerous nuisance"—all this shows clearly that of the real principle of tolerance Burke had scant conception. What effect such principles may have upon his reasonings may be illustrated in his argument about the relief of the Unitarians. They declare against Establishment, he says to the dignitaries of the church; therefore you have the alternative of keeping up their disabilities, or subjecting yourself to their persecution. On such a showing no abuse ever could be attacked with equity, for in assaulting it the reformer would be "persecuting" its beneficiary, and would thereby forfeit his

right to tolerance in turn. Most surprising of all is Burke's deliberate promoting of the blessed Holy War, on the ground of the moral duty of the Allies to an exercise of salutary force to prevent the spread of heretical opinions through Europe. It would have been in vain to ask Burke whether he really thought that muskets and the gibbet were adequate methods for checking a movement which, as he admitted, was one of ideas. He has the satisfaction of meeting reason by force; but he must take the consequence of being writ down a persecutor.

It would be strange if with such feelings Burke had not shown his bias constantly in his reasonings. He says indeed in the essay that the purpose of rhetoric is to display rather the effect of things on the mind of the speaker than to present a clear idea of the things themselves. But to claim allowance for Burke as a rhetorician, and not a mere philosophic reasoner, is simply to admit that he allows his emotional reaction to interfere with his intellectual honesty; and that, however natural it may be, is never an excuse. Indeed his failing cuts at the very root of the philosophic attitude. To be a philosopher one has first to keep his temper. He must be willing to entertain unpalatable opinions without getting angry at them, must weigh them impartially on their evidence, follow premises to their conclusions as if for the moment nothing existed in the world but pure logic. Here is indeed the one essential defect of Burke's genius. His breadth of view was remarkably comprehensive and modern; and because it was so much broader than that of the average man, there is in detail a vast amount in him which is permanently true and fruitful. But Burke could not do what is often possible for men whose range of positive thought is not to be compared to his; he could not put himself beyond the limits of that conception which gripped his imagination and his moral nature. He could not get his own opinions in perspective even for a moment. The consequence is that he remains in the end provincial, though the province over which he rules is a vast one. He cannot get away from the unavoidable overestimate of that scheme of things to which he was used, and which he was accustomed to see only from the inside;

always he swings back to the self-evidence of the existing system which he admires. And this is the ground of that curious phenomenon—an ardent love of liberty and reform, bounded by an absolute fixed limit, outside which he abandons the very principles he has been using on lesser problems. In his judgment on France and the Jacobins this bias becomes an obsession. It is not pleasant to contemplate Burke in his ravings; he feels himself bound to believe the worst and nothing but the worst; his picture of vileness is without relief. On the other side, Burke is equally unable to see any flaws in the roseate picture of monarchical France. The rulers are innocent, and the attack unprovoked. "Never," he writes, "was so beautiful and august a spectacle presented to the moral eye as Europe afforded the day before the Revolution in France." That there is danger of anything but the most chivalrous justice from those trusty servants of God, the allies, and the Bourbon princes whom they are to make masters again in France, Burke will not for a moment admit. At the present day it is hardly necessary to say that this picture, if it is true, leaves the whole Revolution a monstrous and unintelligible anomaly.

Burke's more special theory of society, then, as determined by the existing conditions which he wishes to justify, is an attempt to combine the general principle of social benefit as the underlying law of government, with a system of aristocratic privilege. The special medium for connecting the two, and for disparaging democracy on the contrary side, is the further principle that the great end of government is to "throw the offices into the most virtuously inclined hands." That in the nature of the case it is only an aristocracy that can accomplish this is Burke's justification of the ways of Providence in creating the British constitution.

Burke's postive argument rests chiefly on two considerations. The first is the function of an aristocracy in providing a source from which a safe leadership can reasonably be expected. The representation of the great historic families, free from the constraint that material needs impose, and with the broad outlook that comes from abundant leisure and a liberal



education, nurtured in the tradition of service to the state, and "grafting public principles on private honor," their interests identified with the institutions of their country, and possessed of all the weight and influence needed to draw lesser men in their train—such to Burke seems the only way to secure the service, at once competent and disinterested, which the government of the country needs.

In this there is suggested already the more particular point of political value which Burke finds in an aristocracy. Since stability is the first demand, the greater power should be in the hands of those who have the greatest stake in the country. Here accordingly appears a principle which for Burke is highly important; the deepest basis of the constitution is *property*. It is the very essence of Burke's position that property should have privileges, that it should be "out of all proportion to ability predominant in representation." And the expediency of this is, again, that only so shall we have a body of men both able and anxious to preserve the institutions from which they draw their benefits. In this he sees nothing harmful; "to be honored and even privileged by the laws, opinions, and inveterate prejudices of our country has nothing to provoke horror or indignation in any man."

Now this is a position not unintelligible in itself. But on the other hand Burke accepts the sovereignty of the people as the ultimate source of law and government. To what extent are the two consistent? Burke is extremely ingenious in meeting the difficulty, but his solution can hardly evade the charge of special pleading. The theory of sovereignty has its severest test in connection with the Revolution. Here was a nation which had set aside its rulers and adopted a new polity. The action may have been very unwise. But wherein had the nation exceeded its right? Burke has one answer to this to which it is difficult to listen with patience. It is the inalienable quality of the bond between sovereign and people. This mutual dependence is a contract binding forever, if we are not to have the utter subversion not only of all government, but of the principles of morality itself. It is inviolably fixed, of coercive

power on posterity, needing the free consent of the ruler before it can be changed. The feelings which led Burke to such a position it is not hard to understand; but the position itself is an impossible one. The day for talking of inalienable contracts has gone by, and at least no honest reasoning can pretend that the notion is consistent with the sovereignty of the people. But Burke has a more subtle answer than this to make—an answer which shows rather clearly both his strength and his weakness.

The truth in this second contention lies in the recognition of the difference between the will of the people as a capricious, accidental conformity of wishes in a majority, and the really rational will and conscience, governed by genuine insight, and revealing a permanent trend of enlightened endeavor. Burke is altogether right—and the upholder of democracy may follow him with gratitude—when he maintains the need of subjecting occasional will to permanent reason. But when one has declined to see the voice of God in every utterance of the people alike, there is still a choice of alternatives. He may find the genuine will distinguished from the spurious simply by the test of time, of permanent trend, of a wisdom winnowed from folly through the growing comprehension and self-discovery that comes from the education of the race, and the added experience alike of success and failure. Or—and this is what Burke chooses rather—he may find the distinction identical with that between popular demand, and embodied institutional attainment. And the importance of the difference lies in this, that in the first instance it really is the people who determine—the mass, the majority—whereas the latter may be compatible with almost any limitation of the significant political body. Accordingly we find the conception used by Burke to define the “people” after a fashion capable of any abuse in practical application. The people, he argues, are not the mere collection of individuals; and this undoubtedly is true and valuable. But when he goes on to declare that it is a usurpation to consider simply individuals as against organized forms of society, the way is opened to a dangerous misconception. How Burke is ready to interpret this is evident in its application to the people

of France, where it turns out to mean that the corporate people of France are not the great body of the nation, since by turning against their natural chieftains the common sort of men have lost their title. Rather, the relatively few refugees are actually the French nation, since they alone continue to represent those constitutional forms whose destruction means the turning of the nation into a mob. So again there is truth in the contention that a legislator may actually be best expressing the people's will not by an abject submission to their temporary wishes, but by a devotion to their higher good which will lead him to oppose them in their own best interests. But this again, being interpreted, comes to mean for Burke that a paternal coercion of the popular will is justified when this last is directed against institutions in which the interests of the rulers are bound up. For the basis of obligation is not consent, but the "*presumed* consent of every rational creature as in unison with the predisposed order of things"; and the people cease to be the people when they cease to support the established order. It is quite evident that this is to confuse the moral order of society with the actual order, in a way to empty of all real meaning the doctrine of the people's sovereignty, and to identify the nation with the respectable and ruling classes. With these premises, liberty also can hardly mean for Burke the common article which goes by that name. In reading Burke's glowing tributes to liberty, we need to remember that back of the word there lies a larger and more dominant conception, the conception of the established order; and that even his finest sayings are to be interpreted in the light of this. So when he declares that "liberty and justice are one," he means more than the words might at first imply—the identification of justice, namely, with the British law. Translate the saying into its full implication—liberty is to be a British subject, enjoying to the full Magna Charta, the House of Lords, Church Establishment, and a property franchise with due place for rotten boroughs—and the fine moral flavor tends in part to evaporate.

Now it does not need saying that Burke has no sympathy with oppression and cruelty to the poor. Quite the contrary,

the whole power of society is to be exerted to secure them those rights which they are granted by the laws. But the fact remains that Burke's notion of society is feudal—a romantic idealization of a caste system wherein a splendid and generous upper class benevolently protects its inferiors, and gives to them the blessings which in its wisdom it sees they need. As applied to this society we are to discourage any critical and impartial scrutiny of the scientific understanding. Because the wants of the populace are childish and unstable, we must soften the realism of the bare facts, throw over them the glamor of poetry and imagination, cover life with “pleasing illusions and decent draperies.” We must guard carefully against any spread of the notion that the constitution has defects, is not as perfect as it ought to be, at least until we have it definitely in our power to mend things. People should be led to acquiesce in a belief in the superior wisdom of their law-makers, to repose in them an “unsuspicious confidence” even though they do not see the reason for their acts, as children are on unsafe ground when they begin to question the omniscience of their parents. Without the most weighty reasons, it is “highly dangerous to suppose that the House speaks anything contrary to the sense of the people.” The people are not to assume to question, for example, such high matters as the right or wrong of wars in which governmental policy engages; it is to be taught in general piously to believe in the “mysterious virtues of wax and parchment.” And for Burke this idea of dependence on benevolent superiority is no temporary and deplorable necessity; it is a picture which expands his bosom and appeals to his sense of eternal fitness. Take his quite similar attitude toward women. One great objection he has to a piece of Irish legislation is that it deprives the husband of coercive power over his wife; the declaration that women have been too long under the tyranny of parents and husbands strikes him as “infamous,” and he appeals to the horrible consequences of “taking one half the species wholly out of the guardianship and protection of the other.”

In the end, accordingly, Burke's philosophy of experience comes back to the dangerous, in any case the unheroic maxim,

Let well enough alone. True reform consists only in administering the constitution unselfishly and wisely, and never in experimenting with it, or trying to change it for the better. Burke's great powers and ardent temperament were employed to strengthen the already too powerful hands of prescription, and to give added weight to the very thing that has always been the chief weapon in the hands of the enemies of reform. Systematically Burke endeavors to contract the amount of change to be admitted rather than to make it as large as is safe. The whole outcome of his exhortations is to strengthen the habit of unreasoning attachment to shibboleths, and so to increase the natural weakness of those good souls—the words are his own—"whose credulous morality is so invaluable a treasure to crafty politicians." And the danger of such an emphasis will always be a real one because particularly of certain limitations of human character which no political theory can afford to overlook. Discount as much as we please the gross and intentional sacrifice of public to private interests on the part of the ruling class, it is still impossible to get away from the essential and necessary limitations of humankind when intrusted with power. We habitually and vastly over-rate the wisdom of the wise. We talk glibly of the incapacity of the people to govern; but there are far narrower differences between men than our optimistic generalizations admit. How many persons can we call to mind whom we would willingly for a single day intrust with the ordering of our own lives? And the combining of superior men is in some ways not only no relief, but it is an aggravation of the risk. The only palliative to the unfortunate necessity that some men should have to govern others is a proper feeling of humility, a realizing sense of the fallibility of the human judgment at its best. But a ruling class is always headed the other way. It is under a compulsion to exaggerate its own finality, to become cocksure and autocratic, to widen the gulf between the few who do and the many who must have things done for them, and to prefer to the independent, self-assertive man him who is willing for benefits received to take his superiors at their face value, to mind his own business, and keep hands off of

high and esoteric matters. It is inevitable therefore not only that a division of interests should arise, but that the ruler should in an increasing degree become honestly incapable of seeing things from the standpoint of the subject class. The "Washington point of view" is notoriously provincial and behind the occasion, even with all the facilities in a democracy for bringing opinion to bear.

Now Burke and his philosophy are the victims of this astigmatism. Burke is distinctly a man of the prosperous classes. He looks at things through the eyes of that limited portion of society who by reason of their social and financial superiority find things on the whole to be good, and who can afford to wait even where an occasional reform does seem to be demanded. And yet he was not blind to the sort of indictment which it is possible to bring against accepted conditions. In one of his earliest works there are passages which might have a place in a manifesto of modern socialism. These do not, however, represent Burke's own convictions. The book is the *Vindication of Natural Society*. It purports to be written by a rationalist as an attack upon conventional society; but Burke intends it as a *reductio ad absurdum*. The freethinkers were continually attacking Christianity by pointing to the evils and superstitions connected with it; these were held to justify our condemning it in favor of natural religion, a religion of pure reason. Burke thinks that the same sort of argument would condemn government also, and so in the book he applies it to social organization, intending, of course, to lead his readers to the recognition that so ridiculous a result condemns the whole method of argument. But such a procedure is always a bit risky. It is possible that the reader who has followed his indictment of society may not at the end be in the mood to rest satisfied with his conclusions. No doubt his words were intended to be an exaggeration; and they do give an impression too unrelieved. And yet they are substantially true. And if true, ought they not to interfere a little with our contented acquiescence in things as they are, our feeling of the high wisdom of our ancestors who have handed down to us a heritage with

such fundamental imperfections; and make us a trifle more tolerant toward the discontent, though it be often unwise and extreme, which demands something like decent conditions of life for all, even though it may involve drastic treatment of venerable institutions? Burke dismisses too easily the vision he had conjured up. One need not deny that the civilization which Burke admires has been needful in its day and place. It generated virtues—self-restraint, personal honor and loyalty, a sense of dignity and worth—which are involved in any effective social organization. But Burke was for leaving these eternally the virtues of a class, whereas they are stultified save as they show themselves capable of extending beyond their source and becoming a universal property. And the liberalizing of the masses is an impossibility so long as they are looked down upon, and look upon themselves, as inferiors. Here again the defect of Burke's mind shows in his inability to realize that what to him in the retrospect seems admirable may cease to be really admirable by the very movement to arrest it. Benevolent feudalism has had its part to play, but the part is already coming to a close when it ceases to be accepted unquestioningly. A doubt of its finality constitutes its death blow. The rôle of gracious overlord or Lady Bountiful becomes ungracious, narrow-minded, priggish, even hateful, when it is forced to consciousness by coming into conflict with a demand for human equality on the part of its beneficiaries. Burke's intellectual condemnation lies in his entire inability to see that the real basis of the new movement was not the more or less superficial philosophizing of the theorists, but the awakening of the multitudes to wrongs none the less real because not recognized by the powerful classes, or recognized as inevitable, and determined by a kind Providence to provide the means of living comfortably for its favorites. Take even such a thing as the glaring inaptitudes of the British representative system. Burke insists that all is as it should be, that "our representation has been found perfectly adequate to all the purposes to which a representation of the people can be desired," that no other reason can be supposed for the "suggestion that we are not happy

enough to enjoy a sufficient number of voters in England save the demagogical wish to create discontent."

But now there is one side of Burke's theory which, although it has been referred to already, deserves in closing a word further. The more one examines his reasoning, the more it becomes evident that, stripped of its special emotional aspects, his principle is the sacredness, not of monarchy, nor of the nobility, but of *property*. Burke always conceived that wealth would naturally be absorbed into and strengthen the hereditary nobility, and he did not foresee the rise of a business plutocracy. But had he done so, though he doubtless would have regretted the change, his essential philosophy would still apply. It is this which motivates his attack on the loosening of authority and the growth of a "frantic democracy"; if prescription be once shaken, no species of property is secure. The great danger of the times is the setting up of numbers against property; the principal object of all reform is the conservation of property as well as the monarchy. After all his glowing pictures of the sacred organism of society, it turns out to be the one end of government to police property rights. The constitution "expressly regards property rather than persons."

And it is frankly the great properties for which Burke is chiefly concerned; he even seems to imply that it is these that should be securest, that they have a superior claim over the small and emotionally unimportant holdings. In great fortunes Burke can see no elements of danger or injustice. "I like," he writes of the nobility, "to see your estates as great as they are. I wish they were greater; but I wish above all they should be perpetual." "I have done all I could," he declares again, "to discountenance these inquiries into the fortunes of those who hold large portions of wealth without any apparent merit of their own"; for the state to take back into its hands grants made to classes of men, "let them be held by what names or be supposed susceptible to what abuses soever," is to undermine the very props of society. It is indeed a "sort of profaneness" even to talk of use as effecting the title to property. All the danger and wickedness is on the other side, in the malignant disposition



which "leaves the comparatively indigent to judge of the wealth and prescribe to the opulent what use they are to make of their fortune."

But now does not such a constitution of society based on eternal inequality seem to be slipping away from that roseate-hued perfection of divine wisdom whose praises Burke has been celebrating? If, as Burke allows, the rich are the pensioners of the poor who live upon the surplus of the workers, is there not after all some apparent justification for those pestilential fellows, the Jacobins, who are forever telling about the injustices to which property gives rise? As a final answer, Burke falls back upon the new political economy and the praises of enlightened self-interest. But here again his standing is not quite secure. He would prefer of course to see only good in economic conditions; and to this end he enlarges upon the value to society in letting economic laws have free course, and the necessary connection between the prosperity of the capitalist and the benefit of the laborer; if the former is excessively avaricious, so much the better, says Burke, in his naïve confidence in the presence of God in business. It is really a blessing, however carefully disguised, to the workingman thus to give up his surplus to support the landed capitalist, for though the latter does not labor, "his idleness is the spring of labor, his repose the spur to industry," his "luxury and fashion are necessary to distribute the surplus product of the soil." But to this glorification there is a limit. Try as we may, the dead weight of ignorance, poverty, vice, and suffering that hangs over the head of society cannot by any jugglery permanently be ignored. And so Burke, without apparently seeing that it is fatal to his idealization of the *status quo*, falls back upon the only really honest reply—the confession that a universal good is out of the question, and that meanwhile the relative misery of the masses is required to uphold civilization and make life easy for the upper layers of society. Poverty can never be overcome; it is due to the simple fact of numbers. "By the laws of property, which are the laws of Nature, which are the laws of God, it is impossible to supply to the poor those necessities which it

has pleased the Divine Providence for a while to withhold from them." We must simply accept the innumerable "servile, degrading, unseemly, unmanly, and often most unwholesome and pestiferous occupations to which by the social economy so many wretches are inevitably doomed"—else what would become of kings, members of Parliament, and the professional and mercantile classes? But when justice fails, we can still substitute charity. "When it happens that a man can claim nothing according to the rules of commerce and the principles of justice, he passes out of that department, and comes within the jurisdiction of mercy. Charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty on all Christians, next in order after the payment of debts, full as strong, and by nature made infinitely more delightful to us." So that after all compensation exists. If poverty is a decree of the laws of commerce, which are the laws of Nature, which are the laws of God, at least it adds its mite to the felicity of the wealthy and benevolent patron of the poor.

I am not here concerned with Burke's economic reasoning. But one thing can be said without qualification. One may find himself driven to accept the fact that for the mass of mankind there is no hope for a full and satisfying human life. But to accept this with nonchalance as at most a minor blemish on the fairness of the world, worse still to make out of it an occasion of moral unction, to cry out against any protest as the result only of "wicked pretences and the levity of the people," to intimate that pity for the poor is morally wrong because the laws of Nature make poverty necessary, and that the very use of the word even is a maudlin sentiment when applied to the laboring poor, and not, as it ought alone to be, to the sick and incapacitated, to assert the entire identity of interest between rich and poor, employer and laborer, as so self-evident that "nothing but the malignity, perversity, and ill-grounded passions of mankind can prevent our acknowledging with thankfulness to the benign and wise disposer of all things"—this is to forfeit in so far any claim to be a lover of liberty and the race, unless the excuse be admitted that the speaker is too much occupied with abstract moral and patriotic conventions to have any genu-

ine realization of what his words involve. Both judgments may, I think, be pronounced, with qualification, on Burke. In a way Burke's enthusiasm for freedom and his hatred of oppression may be over-rated. He inclines toward the spectacular always; some rather gross and obvious violation of liberty is needed to call forth his energies; and even here—take his championship of the people of India—indignation at the overthrow of ancient institutions, and at violations of the rights of begums and rajahs, mingles in equal proportions with a detestation of the sufferings of the poor. And when he is stirred by the latter, normally it is the sufferings of individuals that have to catch his eye and inflame his imagination. And he would meet them by—charity. Such an outcome reveals a certain lack of intellectual grasp. It makes of liberty a vague, diffusive, sentiment-arousing term which can ignore the vast mass of actual human wrongs; and then when it does turn the eye to the facts, it would fall back on methods that not only ignore, but actively circumvent, the true end of liberty. For what Burke himself so admirably says of imperialism holds good of his own outcome; no real liberty is possible to any, in a society which is based on what—though it be disguised by constitutional catchwords—is an actual lack of genuine freedom on the part of the majority. The harmony of interests for which Burke calls is not a real identity of interest between the rich and the poor. It is a truce by which the poor give up hope of any save a relative good that the order of society may not be disturbed. And since the order of society is confessedly the interest of the superior classes first of all, to deprecate all doctrines that “tend to make separate parties of the higher and lower orders,” is not to prevent a break, but only to disguise the differences that are already there, to the advantage primarily of one of the interested sides.